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University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, Colorado

ACCENT MODIFICATION AND IDENTITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND
IMMIGRANTS/REFUGEES

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment for Graduation with Honors Distinction and
the Degree of Bachelor of Science

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College of Natural and Health Sciences

MAY 2021

ACCENT MODIFICATION AND IDENTITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND
IMMIGRANTS/REFUGEES

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5/8/2021

Abstract

As immigration rates within the United States increase, the prevalence of speech varying from Standard American English (SAE) continues to grow as well; sub sequentially, many immigrants experience social, personal, and professional obstacles attached to their nonnative speech that can result in feelings of cultural isolation. Accent modification has quickly become a solution for individuals wanting to assimilate themselves into a new culture by adopting the phonemic and pragmatic structures of the regional language, essentially reducing personal discomfort connected with speech; however, those who strongly correlate their accent to their identity may regard the therapy as an unnecessary means of conformity to further strengthen western globalization. This phenomenological study aims at examining the relationship between accent and identity among students from the Center for International Education (CIE) at the University of Northern Colorado as well as immigrants/refugees and from the Immigrant and Refugee Center of Northern Colorado (IRCNOCO) with the purpose of exploring how thoughts and feelings toward accent modification differ between participant groups in regards to their experiences and environment. In addition to uncovering potential themes about immigrant and international identity, results show that feelings towards the phenomenon of accent modification differ between participant groups. In conjunction with additional research, information from this study will help to benefit various professions, the general public, and immigrant populations considering accent modification therapy.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without help and support from the University of Northern Colorado, including the Center for International Education (CIE), the Audiology and Speech-Language Sciences Department, the Honors program, the Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR), and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP). Additional appreciation goes out to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) as well as the Immigrant and Refugee Center of Northern Colorado (IRCNOCO). Specifically, I would also like to thank Loree Crow, Teresa Curtis, Dianne Schott, Dr. Michael Kimball, Dr. Liz Gilbert, Dr. Julie Hanks, Olga Baron, and Jane Borisova for their time, guidance, and advice.

Finally, I extend the upmost gratitude to my thesis advisor, Tina Farrell. Her mentorship and overall confidence in my work inspired me to achieve more than I could have ever imagined. Thank you for helping me to find my passion and being the speech-language pathologist that I aspire to be.

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Introduction

The existence of spoken language has led to the creation of various speech patterns, including their unique phonemic and prosodic features, within different populations across the world. As a result, members of a collective culture share a similar accent, which may have variations depending on locality. An individual's accent denotes location and serves as an indicator of regional or national origin (Valles, 2015). The latter is commonly seen in those who immigrate and/or learn a new language as an adult. As stated by the American Speech-Language Hearing Association (n.d.), nonnative speech tends to sound foreign or choppy because sound patterns found within the new language are dissimilar to the ones previously known. Consequentially, immigrants and international visitors may have difficulty communicating with and being understood by native populations. In the United States, specific policies regarding immigration have created additional pressure for people aspiring to depart their country of origin and obtain citizenship (Hopkins, 2013; Padgett, 2018). National accents and immigrant status may result in mixed feelings regarding the adoption of new social, personal, and professional identities among those who move here indefinitely and those who stay temporarily. However, several speech-language pathology clinics across the country have begun offering solutions for anyone wishing to “be remembered for what [they] say, not [how] they say it” (Flaherty, 2014). Accent modification therapy serves as a communication enhancement tool for many immigrants who aspire to improve their social ties, professional opportunities, and personal image (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, n.d.); however, the morality and ultimate goal of the practice have been periodically questioned as it may imply a push towards western globalization (Baratta, 2016). While an abundance of previous literature examines individual perception of accent and individuality (Baratta, 2016; Birney, Rabinovich, & Morton, 2020; McCrocklin &

Link, 2016), little is known in regards to attitudes concerning the role of accent modification within the social, personal, and professional identities of immigrants. Additionally, even less research analyzes how environment may affect thoughts and feelings towards the phenomenon of accent modification therapy. This study plans to explore the aforementioned areas and will address the following questions:

- How does an individual's association of their accent with their social, personal, and professional identities impact their perception of accent modification?
- How might a person's perspective of accent, identity, and accent modification change based on their environment?

Literature Review

Defining Accent Modification

Accent modification, or accent reduction, is a specialized therapy dedicated to helping individuals with nonnative accents shape or mimic their speech to sound similar to the native speech of a target region (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, n.d). The therapy focuses on areas of both speech and language, allowing clients to learn the proper phonemic structure, intonation patterns, and social communicative skills of a new language. While accent modification services aim to minimize conversational discomfort among nonnative speakers, its overall mission may be perceived as unnecessary (Baratta, 2016; Priestly, 2019). Similar to race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, an accent is not indicative of how much value an individual has. Many people from foreign countries tend to associate themselves with their accent—the way they speak tells a story of their journey to a new country and their incredible ability to learn a new language later in life (Matsuda, 1991; Priestly, 2019). Additionally, the therapy requires a great amount of motivation, financial investment, and time commitment that

varies depending on accent strength and unintelligibility. Accent modification therapy is not a prerequisite for social, professional, and/or personal success in a new country, but it may help individuals achieve goals related to each category (Khurana & Huang, 2013; Mbama, 2017). Overall, the public opinion regarding accent modification services greatly differs among native and nonnative speakers alike. One thing remains certain: regardless of regional or national origin, the way a person speaks heavily impacts their daily life and interactions.

Accents & the Immigrant Experience in Social Settings

According to data from the Pew Research Center (2020), the United States houses over 40 million foreign born individuals and accounts for one-fifth of the world's total immigrant population. The increased migrant presence has contributed to the emergence of different languages spoken across the country: data from the Center for Immigration Studies (2018) shows that one in five individuals in the United States speak a language other than English. While varying levels of foreign language proficiency exist throughout the United States, individuals that learn Standard American English (SAE) after 6 months of age tend to have a foreign accent (Berken, Gracco, Chen, & Klein, 2016). Aggressive political stances regarding immigration have resulted in mixed feelings towards nonnative accents; in extreme circumstances, some undocumented immigrants have sought out accent modification services as a means of avoiding deportation (Padgett, 2018). Although a foreign accent will not immediately mark someone as an illegal resident, many Americans still carry prejudices towards those with nonnative speech (Budiman, 2020; Souza, et. al, 2016). Accent based discrimination, known as accentism or linguicism, can negatively impact an immigrant's ability to find success within a new country. Accounts from blogs, such as "The Accentism Project" (2019), document the hardships experienced by nonnative speakers, many of which feel rejection and/or exclusion because of

unprecedented remarks from others. While accent modifications services may help certain clients overcome communication barriers created by accented speech, they fail to entirely remove acts of language-based prejudice. Subtle comments regarding one's acquisition of the English language serve to stereotype and generalize, using an individual's heritage and country of origin as a measuring stick to add or deduct credibility (Smith, 2020). For many immigrants, developing social ties in a new country means navigating barriers simply created by the way they speak.

Accents & the Immigrant Experience in Professional Environments

In an increasingly multicultural society, many places of work aim to hire employees who can cater to the unique needs of their diverse clientele. According to reports from the New American Employee (2017), demand for bilingual or multilingual workers has more than doubled in the last five years, specifically in occupations requiring a high degree of human interaction. While employers value various forms of communication, they hold speech intelligibility in a higher regard (Carlson & McHenry, 2006). Further research from Morales, Scott, and Yorkston (2012) reveals that accent-standardness plays a role in company performance: consumers show favoritism towards products and services from those with similar accents over those with foreign speech. The desire for employers to retain their bilingual, accented employees while minimizing miscommunication has led to the popularity of accent modification among many places of work (Freysteinson et. al, 2017; Khurana & Huang, 2013). While these services provide positive results in terms of raising speech intelligibility and individual morale, the act of suggestion may appear discriminatory. In some instances, companies that promoted mandatory accent reduction classes to help their workers develop more "natural sounding accents" were met with harsh backlash (Flaherty, 2014). For many

immigrants, accented speech creates barriers for professional aspirations: the U.S Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2008) states that employers may require accent standardness throughout the workplace if unintelligible speech negatively affects job performance (Morales, Scott, & Yorkston, 2012). For those whose profession consists of a more academic setting, research shows that schools play a tremendous role in creating respectful and diverse environments that foster inclusion (Uptin, Wright, & Harwood, 2013). While the experience of international students differs slightly from that of standard immigrants/refugees (Bernum, 2020), both groups are subject to challenges typically associated with migration. For students, additional obstacles include academic writing and communication with classmates, teachers, and other faculty (Garza & Guzman, 2015). Alongside the excitement that comes with obtaining a professional or academic career, adjusting to a new environment can pose several challenges for both immigrants and international students. They must learn to reorient themselves in terms of their aspirations depending on what resources and opportunities become available (Yakushko et. al, 2008). Despite difficulties associated with finding employment or success within a profession, the experience of living in a new country is enough motivation for many immigrants to continue working towards their professional and academic goals.

Accents & the Immigrant Experience with Personal Identity

Similar to name tags, identities reveal unique and personalized information that conform to one's interpretation of themselves (Kimball, 2017, 188). However, unlike the permanencies of a printed name tag, identities are subject to change when encountered by new people and experiences. Moving to a new country can drastically affect self-perception: an article by Verkuyten et al. (2019) discusses the concept of "identity multiplicity," a phenomenon in which immigrants juggle multiple identities formed from previous and current places of residence.

While nonnative speech is an indicator of dissimilarity within native populations, many people argue that speech in general plays a large role in personal identity. Matsuda (1991) claims that the self and accent are inseparable and advocates for a societal change to diminish linguisticism rather than a personal change to modify speech. For this reason, clinics such as Well Said: Toronto Speech Therapy (2017), have begun to substitute the term accent *reduction* for accent *modification* because it gives a more accurate depiction of what the therapy entails. The word “reduction” has a negative connotation, implying that the client must lose one accent to gain another. On the other hand, “modification” sounds less severe, suggesting that speech can be molded and adapted to fit certain regions (James, 2017). Another clinic argues a similar idea, stating that accents are like different wardrobes: people naturally change the way they speak depending on the situation (Tarle, 2012). This belief coincides with the sociological approach of Dramaturgy, which states that an individual adjusts all aspects of themselves, including personality traits and speech-language patterns, to the audience that they are presenting to (Henslin, 2017, p. 118). Further research suggests that experience plays a large role in determining the relationship strength between accent and identity. A study by McCrocklin and Link (2016) examines this phenomenon, noting that international students had a greater tendency to seek out opportunities that enhanced their native-like pronunciation in order to connect with their American peers. However, the difficulty creating and maintaining interethnic friendships causes some immigrants to exclusively seek relationships with people in a similar situation (Kogan, Dollmann, & Weißmann, 2021). Different experiences and associations may lead to various opinions towards accent modification, but there is a need for more research in this area. Regardless of individual perception towards accent and identity, speech remains a significant indicator of cultural disposition and should be respected as such.

Conclusion

While an abundance of literature exists around accents, identity, and the immigrant experience, more research is needed to understand how each factor leads to various perspectives towards accent modification therapy. Previous studies have revealed that perception of accent and identity are inseparable from the immigrant experience (Baratta, 2016; Birney, Rabinovich, & Morton, 2020; McCrocklin & Link, 2016; Kogan, Dollmann, & Weißmann, 2021); therefore, to truly understand how different immigrant populations perceive the phenomenon of accent modification, information about their journey to and life within a new country must also be collected. Although each immigrant experience is as unique as their speech and language patterns, developing a stronger awareness for the intersectionality of accent and identity will help both speech-language pathologists and the general public to gain insight into personal opinions towards accent modification.

Methodology

Participants

Participants for this study included both international students from the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) and immigrants/refugees from the Immigrant and Refugee Center of Northern Colorado (IRCNOCO). In addition to their varying environments, these populations also differ in terms of their (1) reasoning for immigration, (2) academic background, and (3) attitudes about learning English (Bernum, 2020):

1. Immigrants/refugees typically aspire to learn English for a wider variety of reasons, such as finding employment and communicating with members in their community (doctors, grocery store clerks, ect.). International students study English primarily for academic reasons focused on college course work and interactions with professors and faculty.

2. Immigrants/refugees have a variety of academic experience depending on whether or not they received a formal education in their home country. International students almost always have had previous education and supplemental English courses.
3. Immigrants/refugees have a more diverse educational background; consequentially, they tend to have a greater variety of beliefs regarding their acquisition of the English language. International students more often than not have had previous experiences in English courses; therefore, they may have stronger opinions regarding subjects learned previously.

Collecting data from both groups allowed for a more comprehensive view of how experience and environment affect perspectives of accent, identity, and accent modification therapy.

International Students

Undergraduate and postgraduate international students with advanced English proficiency and noticeable national origin accents were eligible to participate. International students also needed to be of at least 18 years of age and affiliated with the Center for Education (CIE) at UNC. Prior to recruiting participants, the researcher obtained permission to observe specific classes conducted by the CIE, including an Intensive English Program (IEP) and a Practical Articulatory Phonetics course. This allowed the researcher to establish connections with the students and understand the material being taught. In total, one undergraduate student and one doctoral student agreed to be interviewed (n=2).

Immigrants/Refugees

Immigrants and refugees with noticeable national origin accents that were of at least 18 years of age and currently employed at the IRCNOCO were eligible to participate. Only three individuals met this criteria, and all three agreed to be interviewed (n=3). The employees of the

IRCNOCO (referred to as Navigators) help incoming immigrants and refugees to “navigate” their lives in a new country. Prior to recruiting participants, the researcher volunteered at the IRCNOCO for 4 months to establish connections with the students at the center and build relationships with the potential participants. The students of the IRCNOCO did not have high enough levels of English proficiency in comparison to the Navigators and were therefore not eligible to participate.

Data Collection & Analysis Procedures

Prior to beginning data collection, the researcher and thesis advisor set out to establish connections with both the CIE and IRCNOCO to develop a better understanding of how to approach the study with the upmost respect and consideration for both centers. Insight from a meeting with a cultural competence consultant at UNC helped to show the importance of developing a project alongside the centers that would be providing participants. This way, information from the study would be mutually beneficial. Once contact had been made with both the CIE and IRCNOCO, the researcher spent four months volunteering at and providing workshops for the centers to establish relationships with potential participants. However, the events of the pandemic created obstacles in terms of meeting and interacting with a variety of people (hence the limited number of participants).

After obtaining various grants (**Appendix D**) and approval from the Institutional Review Board of UNC (**Appendix C**), participants received informed consent forms as well as a copy of semi-structured interview questions with a section specific to their status as international students (**Appendix A**) or immigrants/refugees (**Appendix B**). The questions were written in conjunction with the CIE and IRCNOCO, respectively, to ensure that data collected would benefit both the researcher and the centers. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour and covered topics

pertaining to the migrant identity in terms of social, professional, and personal experiences. The final question asked both international students and immigrants/refugees about their familiarity with accent modification. Regardless of their previous experience with the topic, each participant received a formal definition of the therapy. Upon collecting more information and discussing the implications of modifying one's accent, the participants were asked whether or not they would choose to seek services themselves given the opportunity. All participants were assigned a letter to ensure confidentiality and help with organization (corresponding letters as well as demographic information are located in **Table 1**). Additionally, they received monetary compensation for their time following the conclusion of the interviews.

After acquiring their audio and/or visual recordings, each interview was transcribed and thematically coded by hand. Qualitative software was not used because of their tendency to have an English accent bias: although some transcription tools have the ability to detect and transcribe over 50 languages, they cannot reliably predict words that are modified because of a foreign accent (Duca, 2019). As a means of increasing validity, both the researcher and thesis advisor coded for themes by searching for reoccurring words and phrases within the transcripts. An overview of each theme can be found in the following section titled **Results & Discussion**.

Table 1. Demographic Information

This table shows demographic information for all participants, including their corresponding letters for the purpose of confidentiality and organization.

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>International Students</i> | | <i>Immigrants/Refugees</i> | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | A | B | C | D | E |
| Age | 21 | 32 | 23 | 22 | 26 |
| Gender | F | M | M | M | M |
| Country of Origin | Mainland China | Nigeria | Malaysia | Kenya | Congo |
| Spoken Languages | English, Mandarin | English, Bakura | English, Malay, Rohingya, Burmese, Hindi | English, Swahili, Somali, Arabic | English, French, Lingala, Swahili |
| Years in America | 1.5 | 8 | 2.5 | 3 | 6 |
| Family Members in America | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |

Results & Discussion

Although each international student and immigrant/refugee had their own unique experiences, several reoccurring themes emerged among both populations. Ultimately, effects of the migrant journey on the relationship between accent and identity were seen throughout each interview and resulted in the creation of a variety of themes, including: post-migration racial identity, identity multiplicity, navigating cultural discomfort, and exploring diversity. All led to a potential explanation as to how environment impacts perception of accent modification.

Post-Migration Racial Identity

One of the most prevalent topics discussed within interviews from both groups consisted of the intersectionality of race and the immigrant experience. Many participants noted that, upon immigration, they immediately became aware of the heavy emphasis on skin color in America. This phenomenon, known as post-migration racial identity, was explored previously by research for the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS). While many immigrants share similar intangible experiences, such as discrimination and assimilation, they are also bound together by physical features, such as race and ethnicity (Landry, 2018). The discrepancy in racial awareness from pre- to post-migration became apparent for all participants, including one of the immigrants/refugees who discussed his emotional realization:

I finally had a chance to ask somebody at my work...I was like, “why these people treat me like this? You know, they’re so mean, they don’t even know me.” And then he was like, “man, it’s not even about you, it’s just about being Black, you know?” ... and then that’s why I was like, oh—oh I’m really Black. I’m really Black. And all the negative things that people already probably target the Black community, I was a part of it, you know? And...yeah, that’s really sad. (Participant E)

The heightened sense of racial awareness in combination with immigrant status drastically affected the experience of all participants. Added pressure of both physical appearance and foreign speech impacted one international student's ability to even create friendships within his classes:

You are in a place that, probably in the whole class, you are the only one that look like you. That talk like you... it's okay because then, the whole school was having very few colored people, so, the chances of certain behavior was expected, even when I got there.

(Participant B)

It is important to note that the immigrants/refugees talked more openly about their encounters with racial awareness than the international students did. This phenomenon could be dependent on environment: universities work to create a bubble of inclusion that is not paralleled by the outside world (Uptin, Wright, & Harwood, 2013); however, more research is needed to solidify this theory. Regardless, the collected data shows that the strong connection between racial and migrant identities heavily influenced the experience of all participants.

Identity Multiplicity

In conjunction with racial awareness, each participant discussed the adoption of a new identity upon migrating. The previously mentioned concept of "identity multiplicity" discussed by Verkuyten et al. (2019) explores a similar idea of social, professional, and personal adaptation following immigration to a new country. While both international students and immigrants/refugees spoke on the major differences between their home country and current country of residence, one participant specifically described the moment he began to define his identity in a new context:

It felt like, for me, it was exciting, but at the same time, it was just like—blurry, you know what I mean? ...you basically, like, reborn again. (Participant C)

In addition to the feeling of being “reborn again,” some participants noted that they took on different characteristics, features, and personality traits in order to try and fit in with their new surroundings. One international student described his experience trying to teach himself an American accent as a means of assimilating:

I don't know if now that is necessary, but when I came in, I actually thought of it [accent modification] ... I was making all effort, I looked for material, but I didn't know that there was therapy. And if I had known that there's one, I would have gone for it without thinking twice because...for me, it was very necessary that I know how to speak like everyone else in order for me to fit in, in order for me to understand, in order for me to learn. (Participant B)

Each group of participants discussed their excitement towards embracing American culture, but further examination showed that the international students had more initiative to engage in identity multiplicity than the immigrants/refugees did. The latter had hesitations about fully adopting another identity. It is believed that this is situational and, once again, because of environment: the majority of the immigrants/refugees did not choose to migrate, whereas the international students voluntarily attended a school outside of their country. Additionally, the immigrants/refugees work in an environment where they are constantly surround by individuals from around the world; the international students mostly interact with American peers, faculty, and staff. Overall, the occurrence of multiple identities seems to play a significant role in regards to the general migrant experience.

Navigating Cultural Discomfort

Similar to ideas addressed in the first theme concerning Post-Migration Racial Identity, the participants all encountered additional cultural obstacles that made it harder for them to develop a sense of belonging. Because the topic of cultural discomfort closely coincides to hardships associated with race and assimilation, criteria for this theme encompassed the participants' general cross-cultural experiences. The concept of cultural discomfort is further discussed within the cultural anthropological fields: Kimball (2017) explains that apprehension towards new and unfamiliar cultures leads to feelings of isolation and inferiority among immigrant populations. One of the immigrants/refugees echoes this belief by recounting his own experience navigating the cultural discomfort of others:

Back when I was in high school, whenever I say a word, my fellow classmates would laugh at me because, you know, my accent was totally different... I will say, someone from different community with accent will have more challenges in America. (Participant D)

In comparison to the immigrants/refugees, interviews with the international students showed another way of navigating cultural discomfort. Although they shared their own difficulties assimilating into American culture, both participants described the positive ways in which the people around them attempted to combat the negative effects of culture shock. Specifically, one international student discussed how her instructors helped to create an environment that fostered curiosity and inclusion:

Basically, all my classmates are American...so I'm kind of like the minor, because I'm the Chinese... [instructor name] always ask me questions about China, which makes me feel like I'm important in her class...and also my classmates, they're curious about the

Chinese culture...makes me feel like I'm one of them and we can talk whenever we want, so [it] just feels really good. (Participant A)

Despite the challenges associated with immigration, both participant groups were able to find a sense of belonging within their respective environments. The juxtaposition between experiences shows that cross-cultural relationships can play a significant role in reducing obstacles created by the migrant journey: educating and exposing the general public to the immigrant experience may help to lessen the effects of cultural discomfort for both foreign- and American-born individuals.

Exploring Diversity

The final theme that emerged centered around the increased exploration of diversity. Although members of both groups experienced difficulties associated with racial awareness, identity multiplicity, and cultural discomfort, each participant expressed their admiration towards the assortment of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in America. The variety of people enticed one of the immigrants/refugees to seek work where he could help his diverse community succeed:

One thing I liked about here is—it's really diverse, and I mean, I came into a community where there's diversity. I met with Asian friends, I met with fellow African guys, I met with Americans, I met with Latino people. There was diversity. Where I came from, there wasn't diversity... And, as you know, there's language barriers in Weld County. I mean, communication will be a problem to them [the immigrant/refugee populations] ...I felt I had the urge of helping my community and, you know, hear their needs, their problems.

(Participant D)

Additional comments from another immigrant/refugee mirrored this perspective:

Seeing how God created all this beautiful creature and you wanna just to talk to them.

Sometime, I'll be just having good conversation with people; probably for them, that was just a simple conversation. For me, it was a full experience. I was trying to experience other race, other culture, and that was really a good experience about meeting people.

(Participant E)

Engaging in the lifestyles of various groups of people resulted in positive experiences for all participants. The challenges associated with integrating new migrant populations into the mainstream American culture are daunting; however, through participation in and exposure to different community groups, immigrants can find success navigating their life in a new country. As Navigators of the IRCNOCO, these participants play a tremendous role in helping incoming immigrants/refugees feel safe and comfortable in a situation previously riddled with uncertainty. Similarly, the international students touched on the various ways that they explored diversity within their own environments:

I have loved every of the experiences. By doing, you have one or two experiences that you would not like, but in totality, you'll really say, "yes, it is worth it." And, very enjoyable, having that opportunity to be here, meet people, see how people think, reason, behave...now, I will say that I'm not monocultured anymore. I'm multi-cultured.

(Participant B).

The interactions with people from different backgrounds were a favorable experience across all interviews. Each immigrant/refugee and international student engaged in opportunities to meet and talk with a variety of individuals, helping them to learn about cultures outside of their own while simultaneously sharing information about their own journeys. In general, the chance to make connections with others exceeded any challenges created by physical or linguistic features.

Accent Modification and Environment

Towards the end of the interviews, all participants were given a chance to learn about and discuss the implications of accent modification therapy. Opinions between both participant groups stayed consistent towards the beneficial effects of the therapy, but differed in terms of hypothetical engagement. Specifically, the immigrants/refugees were less likely than the international students to say that they would seek out accent modification given the opportunity. One of the immigrants/refugees touched on his appreciation for the benefits of the therapy, but also explained his personal hesitations towards receiving services:

I'm happy with, like, what I have now. Yeah, and it might change in the future, like, if I keep talking...[but] here's the thing: when people talk, I'll listen to them. So like, I forget their accents and their vocabulary and words that they use...I suppose you can, if you go to therapy and all that, but...it's just not your language. You're not gonna get it.

(Participant C).

Another immigrant/refugee voiced a similar perspective. He stated that, despite his negative encounters with accentism, his strong connection to his home country overshadowed any desire to adopt an American accent:

When it comes to changing the accent, I will change my accent for specific reasons. Like, you know, to have better communication with the next person I'm talking to...and you know, like, job qualifications—like, if I had the same accent as Americans, I wouldn't have lost that job...I don't change my accent at the same time because when I go back to my country, I want to have the same accent—I mean, I want to speak the same accent as my fellow countrymen. (Participant D)

The international students expressed similar attitudes towards the positive aspects of accent modification therapy for immigrant populations in general, but shared more insight as to why they would personally seek the therapy if they were to stay in the United States permanently. For example, one international student discussed her interest in participating in services for the purpose of professional gain:

I think if you can speak more standard American without any accent, you're more convincing...you sound [like] you're more professional, or something like this, so people have better impressions. So I think it's kind of necessary stuff...if there's the therapy like this, and I really need to correct or change my accent to speak more standard English, and through the therapy, I can develop my standard English pronunciation, and maybe my job needed, I can get, like, better job, higher salary, because of that, so...I'll definitely go.

(Participant A)

Similarly, the other international student described his own attitudes towards the therapy and how it still might be beneficial to him after eight years of residing in the United States:

I thought of it [accent modification], I discussed it with my professors, but I did not know that there was therapy. This is really new to me. And probably, I will find out, I will make an effort to see and ask people...I'll try to get feedback if I still need to take the therapy, yes I will if especially I'm staying here. (Participant B)

There are multiple theories as to why the participant groups had varying opinions, but the main one revolves around differing environments. The immigrants/refugees work at a center where the majority of the clientele have national origin accents. Variations in speech from all over the world are present within their community, and as a result, there is no immediate need to seek accent modification services. Furthermore, they already have employment as Navigators and

speak to a variety of other immigrants/refugees in multiple languages with their own distinct linguistic patterns. For these participants, it would not make sense for them to modify their accent for one language and disregard the others. On the contrary, the international students are surrounded by a majority of English-speaking peers, faculty, and staff. They enroll in pronunciation classes, such as an Intensive English Program (IEP) and a Practical Articulatory Phonetics course, that teach them the proper speech and language patterns of SAE. Additional research from Uptin, Wright, and Harwood (2013) shows that some international students feel as if they need to adopt an American accent in order to create friendships with native English speakers. This perspective parallels one from an international student in this study:

I tried to say “hello” to classmates and they [were] not interested...so it made me become more individualistic...for about 3 years I didn’t care to talk to anybody, and I became more “locked,” that I don’t care if anybody exist anymore because I made effort and I felt that if I move and say “hello” to you, at least you say “hello, how are you?” But some would look at me and just don’t answer. (Participant B)

Because of the intersectionality between accent and racial/migrant status, it is difficult to say whether feelings of isolation such as this are solely caused by one identity or another.

Realistically, the persistence of rejection among international students and their American-born peers is made up of several factors, including cultural discomfort, racial/ethnic identity, and accented speech (Kimball, 2017; Uptin, Wright, & Harwood, 2013).

The overall feelings of both international students and immigrants/refugees towards accent modification services appear to be heavily influenced by environment and the migrant experience. However, this is a proposed result given the current study’s limitations that requires more research in order to be confirmed.

Limitations & Future Research

While this study yielded interesting and applicable results with respect to the phenomenon of accent modification and identity, it has several limitations that call for additional research. Primarily, its shortcomings include: size and location of the participant pool; racial, ethnic, and gender diversity; and reasoning for immigration.

Size and Location of Participant Pool

The small number of participants did not allow for information that could be applied to immigrant populations in general. Additionally, this study took place exclusively in the Northern Colorado region so it may not be indicative of immigrant perceptions from other places across the United States. More information from international students at other universities or individuals from other immigrant and refugee centers across the country would help to solidify theorized results about the connection between attitudes towards accent modification and environment. However, after COVID and the scarcity of resources available to undergraduate students, additional participants in multiple locations would not have been feasible for this study.

Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Diversity of Participant Pool

In addition to the small quantity, the majority of participants identified as racial and ethnic minorities. It is predicted that the racial status of the participants led to the creation of the first theme regarding post-migration racial identity. Further research with a diverse range of participants from European, Australian, and South or Central American areas could lead to additional themes or add support to the one previously established. Additionally, because this study had predominantly male participants, results may differ with more variety in gender. However, research with gender-fluid or nonbinary immigrants adds another variable of identity that might need to be examined individually.

Reasoning for Immigration

Prior to focusing on “environment,” the original area of consideration for this study was “reasoning for immigration.” The immigrants/refugees that participated had a variety of reasons for migrating that could not have provided a single, cohesive explanation for their attitudes towards accent modification. Additionally, their profession as “Navigators” ultimately led to results that would not be consistent across other professions, especially ones that hold accent standardness in a high regard. Additional research looking at various reasonings for immigration (including citizenship, education, work, quality of life, etc.) would help to address this area.

Conclusion

Research from this study serves as an introduction to the impact of identity, environment, and the immigrant experience on perceptions of accent modification therapy. Additionally, the intersectionality between accent and identity manifested itself in unique ways across all interviews. Both the international students and immigrants/refugees agreed that accent modification is a considerable option for people who wish to gain benefits associated with a standard American accent; however, the various experiences of each participant led to their final attitudes towards the therapy and western globalization in general. Themes developed from this study coincide with concepts from previous research (Kimball, 2017; Verkuyten et al., 2019; Landry, 2018), adding to the growing literature surrounding similar topics.

In terms of social, personal, and professional identities, all participants noted positive and negative aspects associated with their status as immigrants. Primarily, instances of cultural discomfort in combination with increased awareness of racial and ethnic identities created feelings of isolation. However, with increased exposure to diversity, they were able to create

many cross-cultural relationships that redirected focus from their more pronounced features (such as physical characteristics and linguistic prominence)

Additional information regarding the immigrant experience, the relationship between accent and identity, and personal perceptions of accent modification will help to spread awareness for the unique challenges faced by migrant populations. As immigration rates continue to rise (Budiman, 2020), more research is needed to explore and confirm potential themes derived from this study. Results from similar research will help to: 1) educate the general public about the immigrant experience and, in turn, help to diminish the negative effects associated with cultural discomfort, 2) aid speech-language pathologists in understanding how their clients associate accent and identity, and how accent modification may impact this relationship, and 3) provide information to immigrants in a similar situation that are debating the impact of accent modification on their various identities. Overall, the conversation around accent, identity, and the immigrant experience is far from over. Future research will help to solidify themes developed from this study and amplify migrant voices, aiding in the fight against racism, xenophobia, and accentism.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions (CIE)



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (PARTICIPANT COPY) CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Description: These questions are meant to explore your thoughts and feelings regarding your accent and identity. This interview will be semi-structured, meaning that it will feel like a conversation with guiding prompts. Not all questions may appear during the interview depending on what topics are covered as well as time constraints.

General Questions Asked at the Beginning:

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) What is your gender?
- 3) What country are you from?
- 4) What languages do you speak?
- 5) How long have you been in America?
- 6) Do you have any family members that you care for?

Interview Questions:

- 1) Your decision to come to America
 - a. Why did you move to America?
 - Why did you come to Colorado?
 - What was your home country like?
 - How was school like back home?
 - How is school in America similar to school back home? How is it different?

- 2) Your experience living in a country that primarily speaks English
 - a. What did it feel like to move to a new country?
 - What did you like about the journey?
 - What did you not like about it?
 - How easy/difficult was it to feel at home?
 - Would you consider living here forever?

- 3) Your experience meeting new people and creating relationships
 - a. What was it like to build new relationships with people in America?
 - How easy/difficult has it been to make friends in class?
 - How comfortable are you with talking to professors?
 - How easy/difficult has it been talking to people outside of UNC?

- 4) Your academic journey
 - a. What has it been like going to school in a new country?
 - Do you often participate in class?
 - What are your favorite classes? Why are they your favorite?
 - What are you least favorite classes? Why are they your least favorite?
 - Have you tried working during school? If so, tell me about your experience getting a job.

- 5) Your familiarity with accent therapy as well as your feelings towards it
 - a. Have you ever heard about accent therapy before?
 - Would you ever consider changing the way you speak? Why or why not?

- 6) Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Appendix B: Interview Questions (IRCNOCO)



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (PARTICIPANT COPY) IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE CENTER OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Description: These questions are meant to explore your thoughts and feelings regarding your accent and identity. This interview will be semi-structured, meaning that it will feel like a conversation with guiding prompts. Not all questions may appear during the interview depending on what topics are covered as well as time constraints.

General Questions Asked at the Beginning:

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) What is your gender?
- 3) What country are you from?
- 4) What languages do you speak?
- 5) How long have you been in America?
- 6) Do you have any family members that you care for?

Interview Questions:

- 1) Your decision to come to America
 - a. Why did you move to America?
 - Why did you come to Colorado?
 - What was your home country like?
 - What did you study in school?
 - When did you start taking English classes?

- 2) Your experience living in a country that primarily speaks English
 - a. What did it feel like to move to a new country?
 - What did you like about the journey?
 - What did you not like about it?
 - How easy/difficult was it to feel at home?

- 3) Your experience meeting new people and creating relationships
 - a. What was it like to build new relationships with people in America?
 - Do you have family in the United States?
 - Who were some people that helped you adjust to life in a new country?
 - What do you think of the people you've met while in the United States?

- 4) Your decision to work as a Navigator
 - a. What was it like getting a job here?
 - What was the interview process like?
 - What do your job responsibilities look like?
 - Did you work anywhere else before? What was that experience like?

- 5) Your familiarity with accent therapy as well as your feelings towards it
 - a. Have you ever heard about accent therapy before?
 - Would you ever consider changing the way you speak? Why or why not?

- 6) Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Appendix C: IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board

DATE: March 12, 2020

TO: Gabriela Masztalerz

FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1422126-1] Accent Modification and Identity: A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Experiences of International Students and Immigrants/Refugees

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: March 12, 2020

EXPIRATION DATE: March 12, 2024

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or nicole.morse@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

Appendix D: Grants & Awards

This study was also made possible with support from the College of Natural and Health Sciences (NHS) at UNC as well as the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC):

NHS Student Research Fund—\$225

Out of 12 applicants, 8 students were selected for full or partial funding. This study received its requested amount of \$225, which helped to provide compensation for all participants.

NCHC Portz Fellowship—\$5000

This prestigious fellowship was granted to students whose research demonstrated excellence in terms of design and interdisciplinary components. Applicants from all over the nation competed for various tiers of awards, ranging from \$3000 to \$5000. Three projects, including this one, were chosen for the \$5000 award. Earnings from the fellowship were used to cover tuition costs, helping the researcher to focus on academics and further efforts for researcher.